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ABSTRACT

The theoretical African mode of thinking about liberty seems to stand in contrast to the view of liberty that has dominated Western philosophy. Western philosophy accepts as its starting point the notion of an unconstrained and uncontextualized "I" that is defined in relation to the self and its inner being. Greek, Cartesian, and classical European philosophy evolved an "I/it" model in which human freedom becomes a tool for mastering the universe. The African mode emphasizes a more communal "I" that is always connected to and in relationship with others. The attitudes and practices of the Luba of Zaire illustrate the concept of an "I" that is a subjective consciousness, contingent upon others and upon a socially-defined space. For the Luba, the "I" is never defined by an autonomous self, but by a group of others, and the exercise of freedom is predetermined by this fact. In the West, the primacy of the "I/it" model has paralleled hierarchical social and political systems of exclusion and domination. In contrast, the traditional African conception involves an "I/with" or "I/we" model, and freedom involves freedom for the group and for the individual in relation to the group. These opposing perceptions of "I/it" and "I/we" are resolved to some degree in the work of Rousseau, Freud, Marx, and many feminist theorists. (FMW)

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Essays and Policy Studies

Liberty in African and Western Thought

V. Y. Mudimbe

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Essays on Liberty

This is one of several of essays and policy studies intended for policymakers, researchers, teachers, administrators, parents, students and others who are interested in the education of African-American, Hispanic-American, American-Indian and Asian-American youth.

The entire series of essays and policy studies explores the cultural roots and historical legacies of these various groups. It probes what it means to be independent and to enjoy that liberty. It discusses the general context of learning in schools of all types, and it lays the foundation for determining what must be done to enhance American education. It is designed also to stimulte readers to consider why independent schools are important and what role they should have in America's educational system.

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COVER: Excerpt from a chart developed in 1700 by Edmund Halley, the English astronomer and geographer. It was used by navigators on ships bringing Africans to the Americas. *(Source: U.S. Library of Congress)*

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Oswald M. T. Ratteray, Editor
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Liberty in African and Western Thought

V. Y. Mudimbe

To the extent that we can identify a theoretical African mode of thinking about liberty, it seems to stand in contrast to the view of liberty that has dominated Western philosophy.

Western philosophy accepts as its starting point the notion of an unconstrained and uncontextualized "I" — that is, an "I" defined in relation to the self and its inner being, rather than in relation to others. The African mode, however, seems more communal and emphasizes an "I" that is always connected to and in relationship with others. This way of thinking can be illustrated with reference to the Luba, an African people whose model of human consciousness and freedom could be seen as illustrating traditional African thought.

Like all cultural groups, the Luba have established a "space" for themselves. Their space is defined in one way as a certain geographical part of the country now known as Zaire, which is located near the center of the continent of Africa. However, they also define their space with their particular language, traditions and norms. In this "geography," a human being, an "I", is always in a relation of exchanges with other beings. The subjective consciousness of an "I" is contingent upon others and upon a socially-defined space.

In fact, the "I" is a subjective consciousness. Its freedom is not an absolute freedom that could be posited as a pure manifestation of critical consciousness. In effect, the "I" is defined and perceived as a being of relations, and the exer-

cise of freedom seems predetermined by this fact. The "I" is simply unthinkable outside of a social space of relations and its norms concerning a hierarchical, yet dialectical, system of complementarity existing between the dead and the living, men and women, elders and youngsters, culture and nature.

For example, in order to maintain a social order and its continuity, Luba believe in promoting radical separations in the communion of a human community: the world of women should be clearly distinguished from that of men, sons are denied any involvement in their mothers' activities, daughters are to be excluded from their fathers' social and cultural milieux, and in-laws of different sex are not allowed to talk to each other directly.

Among the Luba, these norms and others regarding everyday life tend to reinforce a way of thinking. For instance, children are named first with reference to the lineage in which they are born. This naming positions them in relation to a whole system of others: parents, ancestors and other lineages.

In Western families, John Doe is conscious that he is the son of Mary and Michael Doe, who in turn descended from other Does. His family tree has its space in time, if not in geography. His "I" is contingent upon others. John Doe is also the cousin of Robert Smith, who has a similar family tree. The two different families, Doe and Smith, are united because at some point two brothers once married into different families and created separate family trees. Their naming positions them in relationship to each other's lineage through the word "cousin."

Finally, John Doe is conscious that his "I" bears distinct psychological traits and sometimes physical reminders of his genetic community. These define, confine and sometimes burden his "I", linking it directly in relation to other relatives in his own family tree. Lay members of families believe that John's trait of stubborness is "inherited" from his father and perhaps even his grandfather. In some instances, traits are assumed to cross lineages: "He's just like his uncle."

Whether or not these assumptions are scientifically demonstrable is of no consequence, since people believe them to be so and act out their relationships and pursue their destinies as if they are true.

In the Luba setting, there is no family name. John Doe would have been the only John Doe in his family, named after a grandfather or an uncle. His brothers and sisters could have been named Mary Boyi, Elizabeth Kala, Peter Landu, all names that, in principle and in fact, should be names of peoples belonging to an older generation.

The apparent "disorder" in naming has two effects. First, it individualizes each human being in his or her own rights and, at the same time, links the individual to a collective memory of his lineage. John Doe's freedom is thus strictly framed. It has a history which defines the sense of a collective identity.

Second, it establishes individual "sin" as a collective responsibility. For example, in a Western context, John Doe submits to social and judicial laws and, in principle and in last resort, his consciousness should be the last tribunal for making a moral evaluation of his actions. In the Luba context, John Doe also must submit to juridical laws that the society controls through its judges and lawyers, but these laws do not bind individual consciences. John will also learn, as soon as he comes of age, that in the Luba tradition there are taboo laws, principally of a religious nature, which are generally negative norms specifying what should be avoided absolutely, such as incest, regicide, patricide or matricide, and so on. These laws contain in themselves an immanent power of sanction of which God is the sole judge. Whatever the transgression, no human being can forgive a taboo-sin. The problem and its resolution lie in a dialectic: the possible dialogue of the transgressor and God on the one hand, and his family and the departed ancestors on the other. In this dialectic, it is clear that the autonomy of the transgressor's liberty is checked and compensated by the commitment of his or her community.

For the Luba, then, the "I" is never defined by an autonomous self, but by a group of others. It is an "I" which is always defining a self in relation with others. To be is necessarily to be in relation. In fact, the "I" is unthinkable outside of a social space of relations. In this context, therefore, "freedom" is experienced as a tension between the tradition of the group and the subjectivity of the "I." This may be referred to as the "I/with" or "I/we" model.

In contrast, the human being in Greek philosophy is a discrete entity, possessing a critical and free consciousness. This consciousness gains knowledge by dividing, separating and categorizing, thus becoming master of what is "out there" in the universe. The individual self, placed at the center, is seen as possessing the authority of definition. Human freedom then becomes a tool for mastering the universe. This sense of mastery is an imperialistic procedure for knowing.

In 17th century France, Descartes, following the Greek tradition, demonstrated the pertinence of *cogito ergo sum*: "I think, therefore, I am." Knowing for certain that he existed, Descartes was able to deduce the existence of other things and other ideas. This is the "I/it" construct in which "I" is the absolute point of certainty and truth, a point of departure for other knowledge. Under Cartesian principles, an isolated being can have an autonomous freedom and a consciousness that defines itself without reference to a group. This consciousness is seen as capable of existing outside of a socially defined space of relations.

The classical European practice of philosophy, as actualized by British thinkers such as Hume, Locke, Mills and Smith, like that of the Greeks before them, posits the human being as an element, an absolutely critical and free consciousness in the universe. Their general perspective expounds processes and procedures of knowing by separating and reducing beings and entities to paradigms. In this respect, human freedom once more can be seen as a means for mastering the "other."

The African model presented here seems more humble, in any case essentially anthropocentric. Indeed, as such, it seems to run the risk of engendering naive anthropomorphic interpretations, but its basis is remarkably sound. Its center is a human being who is free and at the same time highly dependent upon others, on the memory of the past, and on the objective reality of nature and the universe. By emphasizing the balance between nature and culture, where the European model emhasizes the primacy of the culture upon nature, and by defining the "I" as primarily a being of relations, the Luba model seems neatly communal in the comprehensive sense of the adjective. It can be opposed to the Cartesian model.

The Cartesian *cogito* is the founding principle of subjectivism and individualism which, during the 1930s and 1940s in Germany, were powerfully expressed in the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. It is also seen in the existentialism of Sartre and de Beauvoir from France, and the classical "I" in the American paradigm of liberty.

Similar to the bases of Western philosophies of knowledge, the philosophies of society developed by Hegel, Rousseau and de Tocqueville also begin by affirming a supposedly obvious, individual freedom. It is founded on the idea of an independent consciousness which then freely enters into social contracts such as marriage, forms of government and economic exchanges.

In the West, the primacy of the "I/it" model has paralleled hierarchical social and political systems of exclusion and domination. For example, the slave trade as well as colonization can be interpreted on the basis of a philosophical paradigm. Some human beings derive a superiority complex in the process of trying to reduce within themselves the tension that divides all individuals: on the one hand, a being-in-itself (the body) and on the other, a being-for-itself (the consciousness). Their mastery of this philosophical tension then can justify policies of reducing other human beings to the status of in-itselves or things, resulting in

practices like slave trading. Or it can justify policies that are based on an evolutionary hypothesis, according to which it is possible to bring out a for-itself from an in-itself, such as occurred with the colonizing mission of European countries in Africa.

In this manner, Aristotle was the first in the literature of the West to classify humans as free or slave. If they were members of the city, the *polis*, they were free; slaves were not members. As Simonides, another Greek thinker, wrote: *polis didaskei andra*; it is the city which teaches "men." This excluded women, as well as slaves. Later philosophies advocated different systems of classification.

In the 15th century, for instance, Pope Nicholas V determined that only Christians could be properly free human beings who could, as a result, own property. Anyone who was not a Christian could be dispossessed and enslaved. In effect, assuming that the self can be imagined and can in fact acquire knowledge outside a space of social relations, it becomes possible for a consciousness to think about its own freedom while objectifying others and even negating the possibility of freedom for someone else.

Other divisions of humanity, such as those based on gender and race, persisted even after the French Revolution in 1789 began the process of opening up the city, allowing more people to become members. That is the implication for the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which made slaves "citizens" of the United States of America, and we can link it to the famous Declaration of Human Rights.

However, there are two factors that are important to consider at this point. First, Durkheim, the father of French sociology, insisted on the fact that there is such a thing as a social collective. Second, if, thanks to Freudianism and Marxism, we tend to think that human freedom is no longer absolutely dependent upon the certainty of a consciousness thinking about itself, and we agree that all consciousnesses are enslaved and conditioned through and through, it is nonetheless useful to note that Freudianism and Marxism

are objectivist systems. They expound the primacy of abstract and reductionist models which fundamentally negate the complexity of the real, the particular and the individual.

In contrast to the Western model of the unconstrained "I" achieving freedom by objectifying others, the traditional African conception of freedom involves freedom for the group and for the individual in relation to the group. While we can contrast these two models — the "I/with" or "I/we" model of traditional African thought and the "I/it" model of the West — it is important to recognize that these opposing models may coexist.

Rousseau is an example of a person in whose thought we can find both models. Although he founded his social philosophy on the assumption of an autonomous individual consciousness, he also wrote that "I" is "another." In other words, he was able to imagine the possibility of communion instead of separation. Feminist theorists have also begun to consider the possibility that the "I/it" model is found more among men than among women.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the 14th Amendment reactualizes a Greek ambiguity. Did the integration mean an assimilation, that is a proclamation of the "I/it" model which is still dominant, or did it mean that there is a possibility of promoting an "I/we" model which seems to go against the basis of the Western experience? In any case, the question to be posed is, To what extent has the perception of liberty by African Americans been marked or not marked by the tension described in this essay between the "I/we" and the "I/it" models?

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Essays on Liberty

Liberty in African and Western Thought
by V. Y. Mudimbe

The concept of "I" in relation to the group is an important part of African philosophy and stands in contrast to the "I" in separation that is the foundation of European and American ideas on liberty.

Independence and the Spirit of Community
by Tshilemalema Mukenge

Young people among the Luba of Zaire learn how to internalize values such as independence, self-reliance and hard work, and their independence is coterminous with the spirit of community.

Africans Away from Home
by John Henrik Clarke

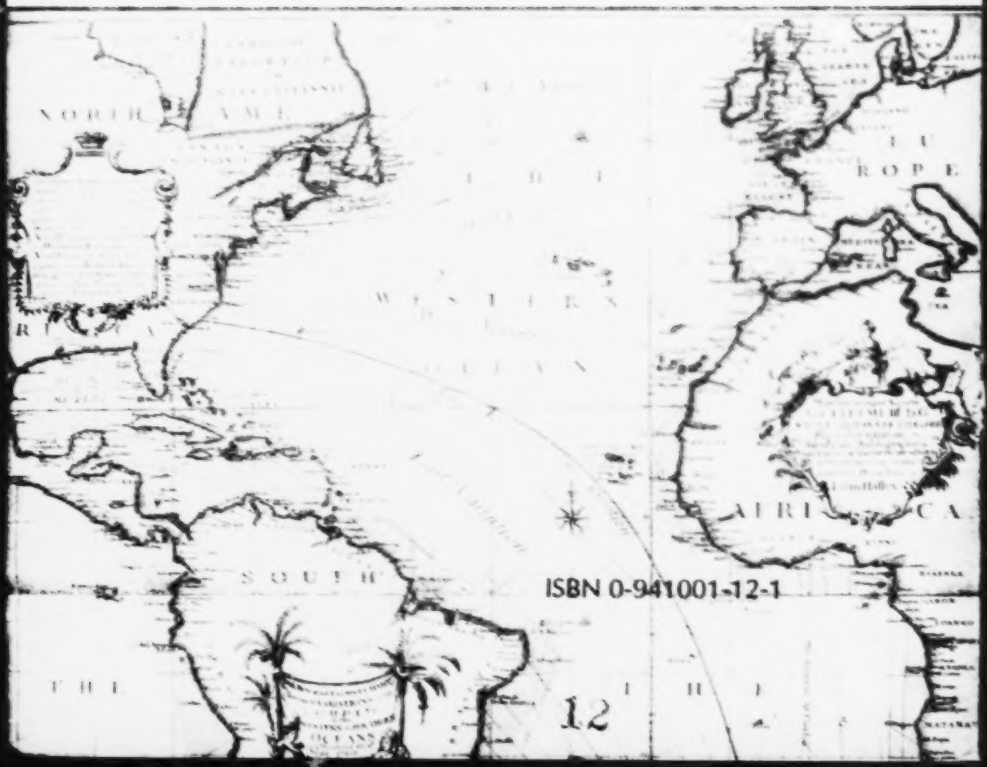
Africans in South America, the Caribbean and the United States have pursued liberty in many different ways, but they are all linked by the forceful presence of African cultural continuity.

Expressions of Liberty
by Nancy Elizabeth Fitch

Unable to achieve full freedom, African Americans have expressed concepts of liberty in prose and lyrics, including slave autobiographies, oratory, spirituals, the "ringshout" and jazz.

Freedom of the Mind
by Joan Davis Ratteray

Americans have defined liberty with voices that have not always been harmonious, and even though many people have tried to obliterate the spirit of African Americans, some independent schools have begun to shape free minds from an African frame of reference.



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